

Abstract

This article explores the multisensory role of visual culture in articulating the embodied and material dimensions of an informal sport within a youth community in Tijuana, Mexico. Drawing on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, it examines how young sportsmen use visual production to represent and share the material entanglements of their practice, made of a dynamic synthesis of bodies, material culture, and urban spaces. By analysing the failed “implication” in a collaborative visual project with a local interlocutor, I reflect on the methodological challenges of “observant participation” in sport ethnography, where bodily “implication” through a domestication of local material culture is essential yet inherently limited for the researcher. The discrepancy between visual languages for self-representation and textual languages for etic description explains both the failure of collaboration in the local visual project and the possibility of deriving ethnographic knowledge from it. The study argues that the distinction between narrative languages and forms is ultimately rooted in varying degrees of incorporation between bodies in motion and specific regimes of materiality, considering the latter as typical traits in the subjectification of the young sportsmen in Tijuana.

Keywords

Material culture; body, space; sport; ethnography

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Introduction

It was a sultry afternoon in August 2023 when, after finishing an interview with an informant, I was walking through an alley in downtown Tijuana (Mexico), home to a group of young street artists, writers and skateboarders with whom I had developed close relationships on the field. I had no intention of lingering. The previous months had taught me that this place of coexistence, idleness, work and conviviality could very easily engulf one in moments of collective 'doing nothing', the ending of which was impossible to predict in advance. However, as often happened, as I passed by, someone hurried to approach me, blocking my way. Tony (a local skateboard videographer) was not one of the members I was most familiar with; in fact, we had only got to know each other the previous month. Nevertheless, halfway between excited and nervous, he skipped the pleasantries and proposed what he called a "once-in-a-lifetime" idea for his next video: *"Not the usual skateboard video with tricks. A video that makes people understand what skateboarding means to us here, as something religioso"*¹. I was perplexed, to say the least. Whether it is the boldness of the proposal or the reference to a spiritual dimension of sport that practitioners rarely express outside their intimate or academic circles (O'Connor 2021), I wonder, and I ask him, *"why me?"*. Why the rush to tell the only outsider in the group, when so many more experienced and 'devoted' people were sitting on the pavements of the alleyway during our conversation? *"Because you come from the Pope's city, we need you"* Tony replied bluntly, further complicating my understanding of the matter, at least until our subsequent meetings.

In this article, I draw inspiration from the encounter and "implication" (Fava 2013)² in Tony's proposal to engage in an exercise of "reflexivity" (Davies 1998) about the "multisensory" role of the visual (Grasseni 2022) in communicating, sharing and reproducing the material entanglements of a motor culture composed of bodies and a specific material culture. Retracing the failure of such implication, I then extend the discussion to the possibilities, dilemmas and methodological short circuits typical of the ethnography of sport - or what can cacophonously be called physical practices - by virtue of the role that specific materialities play in subjectivising the moving bodies of interlocutors, to which the researcher can only have partial access.

Since the social sciences became concerned with physical practices, all the limitations of a "meta-sociological approach" (Miller and Woodward 2007) to understanding shared knowledge, minute folklore and micro-politics that develop within playful or sporting "frames" (Bateson 1972) of action have emerged. This methodological and cognitive embarrassment derives largely from the role of bodies as means and arenas for the collective negotiation of cultural values, boundaries and meanings. Hence the punctual rescue of an anthropological sensibility through a "carnal approach" (Wacquant 2004) according to which, to acquire phenomenological, experiential and

¹ Interviews were conducted in Spanish, while field notes were taken in both Italian and Spanish. I have translated both into English for the purposes of this article.

² I have translated all the quotations from the Italian and French editions for the purposes of this article.

social knowledge of a sporting phenomenon, researchers must actively pursue it by acquiring a certain degree of practical competence. Elevating the body and its modifications to an instrument of investigation has therefore often led anthropology to re-examine some of its fundamental causal chains. Those interested in sport often refer to “observant participation” to describe an “involved” stance in motor practices through which physical and somatic states are experienced and shared, leading to the development of specific body cultures and their movements in the social environment. Halfway between a hermeneutic challenge and an easy rhetorical device that preserves the “oxymoron” (Pavanello 2007: 231) of the anthropological method, the ethnographic approach to sport nevertheless has the merit of extending, on both a physical and – I would add – material level, the general assumption that “ethnographers attempt to be both emotionally engaged participants and coolly dispassionate observers of the lives of the others” (Tedlock 1991: 69). However, based on my fieldwork, I argue that the profound articulation between bodies and materiality is a little-discussed intertwining not only in anthropology in general (Diasio 2009), but especially in its sports version. Attention to the visual culture of practitioners compensates partly for this omission on a phenomenological level, without however resolving the challenges of access to the “corporal synthesis” (Warnier 2005) that sportspeople construct in accordance with their material culture.

In the article, I elucidate these two dimensions leveraging fifteen months of ethnographic research – September 2022 to December 2023, with returns over the following two years – on the western border between Mexico and the United States about the “social biographies” (Kopytoff 1986) of the material culture central to a particular informal sport: skateboarding. Having practised this activity as a teenager, I abandoned it for a long time before rediscovering it in Mexico through an ethnographic lens. This led me to familiarise myself with local “body techniques” (Mauss 2017), which in turn allowed me to critically contextualise the supposed universal “internal logics” (Parlebas 1999) of skateboarding within the “body” (Brownell, 1995) and “material” (Miller 2010) cultures that define what my informants call the “Mexican skater”. By tracing the cross-border social lives of skateboards, which are produced by the U.S. industry in Tijuana (Mexico) following the mid-1990s liberalisation of the border, I adopted a multi-sited approach. This led me to work with grassroots practitioners, producers and traders in northern Mexico, as well as skaters, artists and directors of skateboard museums in California, namely between San Diego and Simi Valley.

I approached all the spaces of practice, production, consumption and exchange that I encountered from the perspective of the materiality of the objects that guided me, and from its role in defining the values of a local motor culture that was always measured to a certain extent on *el otro lado* [the other side of the border].

Skateboarding is a practice that originated in California in the 1950s and 1960s. The same California that is just a few kilometres away from Tijuana, but which remains inaccessible to almost all local youth due to the immobility imposed by the border regime and migration policies over the last three decades (Alarcón 2011; Durand 2016). This is therefore a unique condition of distance and proximity not only to the United States as a

geopolitical 'other', but particularly to California as the cultural core of their chosen physical practice. The border status of my interlocutors resonates with what Yeh (2016) defines a state of "intimacy and separation" (67) with northern culture, where the first element is represented precisely by easy access to the material culture necessary for skateboarding (boards), hijacked daily from U.S. factories to local popular markets (Buchetti 2025). Considering these movements in northern Mexico as a regional "systems of provision" (Fine and Leopold 2002), I was able to analyse the articulation between the patterns of object circulation, the people who interact with them, and the resulting knowledge. Indeed, in my case, the supply infrastructure is not just a backdrop to the social context, rather it profoundly determines the choices and values of those who use the material culture it puts into circulation. Choices that, in the case of a sporting activity, always have a starting point or destination in the practitioners' bodies (Buchetti 2024). By moving through these networks, I analysed the human economies underlying this scene. Specifically, I examined the circulation networks that link local youth with the industry producing skateboards for the global market. I also sought to familiarise myself with the ways in which the body is used and conceived in relation to local regimes of materiality, through a slow process of apprenticeship to the local skaters movements and practices in accordance with urban built spaces and so-called 'smuggled' skateboards. This latter dimension – bodily, sensory and material – was characterised by the most misunderstandings and failures, but also by critical and reflective insights, precisely because it was composed of "daily actions which take place spontaneously and bypass conscious thinking, and are also often impossible to explain" (Douny and Mohan 2020: 17).

The article elaborates on some of these critical points based on unstructured interviews, field notes transcribed daily in diaries, informal conversations and, above all, long-term practical participation focused on the socialisation of my body according to techniques, values and stances considered "typical" of the local context. The participants in the research are presented under pseudonyms unless they have expressed a desire to be identified by the nicknames by which they are known in their community of practice.

The body, the space... and the object

Since the 1980s, the revitalisation of the anthropology of material culture has emphasised the mutual processes of externalisation and re-incorporation between subjects and matter – in the British case (Miller 2010) – and an integration of Marcel Mauss's famous essay *Les techniques du corps* (1934) starting from the role of objects in constructing bodies in motion in specific cultural environments – in the French tradition (Warnier 2005; Julien and Warnier 1999). Without dismissing the former's insights, this second strand and its emphasis on "movement" as the organiser of the synthesis between bodies, environments and objects has often called into question practices that we could generically define as sporting. Warnier himself opens his *Construire les cultures matérielles* (1999) with examples of sailors, motorists and skiers, in which they "make body" with rudders, steering wheels, skis, "sailing boards" and paragliders (Warnier 2005: 15), developing bodily automatisms with which to "navigate" their equally material

environments. Furthermore, his proposal for a “praxeological” approach to material culture – which goes beyond Mauss's biological body to consider it as a “dynamic synthesis of sensomotricity in a given materiality” (Warnier 2001: 7) – has its roots in some famous sociological studies on sports and athletic games (Parlebas 1999).

However, despite these fortunate coincidences, research on sport has often struggled to integrate both these theoretical invitations and the numerous ethnographic studies carried out by the *Matière à Penser* research group on material culture (of which Warnier is one of the founders) (Gowlland 2011). In the latter, the dynamic articulation between bodies and objects as a site for the construction of “sensory-motor conducts” (Warnier 2005) offers great inspiration for sporting practices. Nevertheless, many studies on sport seem to have remained more adherent to Mauss's famous example of the Kabyle shepherd who inexplicably manages to run down a rocky slope without losing his slippers (Mauss 2017). Mauss offers a sophisticated response to his amazement, analysing the construction of a “body technique” in the relationship between the socio-material environment of the Algerian region and the physical body of the agile shepherd. Yet what about those slippers? Are they nothing more than inert objects, or do they play a role in the processes of incorporation and disincorporation through which an individual subjectivises themselves in their material and cultural environment? We could pose the same question to many studies on physical activities. Although there are ethnographies of sport in which the role of objects – especially ritual ones (Fanoli 2020) – is recognised, they remain marginal and often relegated to a performative dimension, excluding their minute functions in creating the “body schemas” (Schilder 1935) with which practitioners subjectify themselves in their material environments.

My object of study is emblematic of this critique. For the past twenty-five years, Anglo-Saxon social sciences have regarded skateboarding as an unparalleled form of engagement with the urban environment. Researchers have identified its potential to redefine urban architecture (Borden 2001) and offer new ways to engage with metropolitan “grey spaces” (O'Connor et al. 2025; Glenney et al. 2024). Of the three macro-approaches to material culture – semiological-structuralist, technological, and Foucauldian (Pettinato 2024) – social scientists interested in this informal sport have undoubtedly favoured the first. Furthermore, the sole regime of materiality considered is typically the architecture of generic urban contexts. As in Mauss's example, sophisticated analyses have been produced on the – semantic, sensory, gender, spiritual, and ethnic – interaction between the bodies of skateboarders and the city (Bäckstöröm and Sand 2019). However, the social role of the objects that allow skateboarders to move around urban surfaces has been overlooked. As the body-space interaction has gradually adapted to *specific* cultural spaces (McDuie-Ra 2021a; Holskens 2021) and bodies (Yochim 2010), the relationship with objects has remained understudied.

However, some Latin American works constitute an exception. They are heirs to an intellectual tradition on so-called “physical education” that has little to do with the Euro-American understanding of the term (Varea and Galak 2013). Starting with the *Asociación Internacional en Praxeología Motriz* (AIPRAM) research group and the *Seminarios Latinoamericanos de Praxeología Motriz* (Bortoleto et al. 2020), anthropologists,

sociologists, and sports scientists have provided interesting insights into the “internal logics” (Parlebas 1999) through which practitioners organise their physical activities in relation to their peers, the surrounding space, time, and materials. Contemporary board sports, surfing in particular, have paved the way for discussion in this context (Cibeyra and Saravì 2020). However, although attentive to material culture, these studies remain partially didactic. Coherently with their main theoretical references, they use to reconstruct the “universal” (Parlebas 2020) logics structuring specific sport and the bodies of their practitioners in transcultural ways. Such first steps toward the social roles of materiality in sports leave several questions unanswered about the minute processes of incorporation through which precise motor schemas are constructed in relation to the material environments of practice, as well as the cultural gap between researcher and actors, which often plays out on the same bodily layer.

Unfortunately, the two theoretical domains – Anglophone and Latin American – remain isolated from each other. However, when considering the visual productions and sensibilities with which practitioners of so-called urban, informal and “lifestyle” (Wheaton 2013) sports represent their motor practices, signs of continuity in the respective relationships between bodies and materiality – spatial in one case, objectual in the other – emerge. To grasp the convergences between spaces, objects and bodies, it is necessary to consider these sports as subjectivation universes that are not only limited to athletic moments. From the practitioner's perspective, every physical activity constitutes a sensory and motor universe, both during performance and in those ‘minor’ everyday, domestic, leisure and work moments when one continues to interact with the materiality of sport or to reproduce its movements. This blurring of boundaries is particularly evident in urban informal sports, whose ‘informality’ actually often builds on the absence of designated athletic spaces, as I will discuss in more detail later. Contexts for practice are often everyday environments, and technical objects are used for everyday purposes, notably for locomotion as seen in mountain biking, parkour, free running and skateboarding.

Visualizing sporting synthesis

In lifestyle sports that romanticise a connection with nature (Nardini 2022), as well as in the informal ones that idealistically claim a link with the urban environment (Glenney 2023), the senses are often privileged vehicles for experiencing and representing not-verbalizable practice, emotions and incorporate knowledges. Numerous studies have examined the sensory processes through which skateboarders develop a synthesis with urban spaces (Hölsger and Glenney 2025; Maier 2016), as well their visual representations of such spatial interactions (McDuie-Ra 2021b; Vivoni 2009). Vivoni (2009) notably discusses a “below-the-knees method” through which skateboarders mark, embody and represent urban space “on the ground”. A sort of “skater's eye” (Borden 2001), through which urban materiality is read and incorporated by learning how to move one's body among the minute, superficial, and concrete details that usually dissolve in the two-dimensional cartographic image of the city. It is a kind of intimate gaze at practitioners that makes skateboarding something “pre-reflectively interlocked with its

spaces, motoric skills, and shared experiences" (O'Connor et al. 2025: 334), which functions both as a process of bodily enskilment in urban materiality and as a channel for representing it to the outside world.

However, the emphasis on a particular 'skater eye' in literature raises two issues, the same ones that I faced with the visual project proposed by Tony. On the one hand, such oculo-centric sensitivity suggests a quick and "prominent association of skateboarding as a visual culture" (O'Connor et al. 2025: 333). While it is undoubtedly true that an informal sport practised in accidental urban spaces requires constant vigilance and visual alertness in order to interpret the surrounding environment and respond to it physically, this does not mean that the 'skater's eye' is divorced from the other senses. On the contrary, such gaze in motion in the city is based on the decoding of sounds (Maier 2016), balances, tactile sensations derived from surfaces and technical objects, and even "smell and taste contribute to this multisensory array, including bodily fluids such as sweat and blood" (Hölsgens and Glenney 2025: 22). However, in this urban motor culture, it remains the case that the visual is the preferred channel of self-representation. Nevertheless, as evidenced by various ethnographies (Hölsgens 2021; McDuié-Ra 2021b), it emerges that visual channels serve as both amplifiers and as an arena for presenting a multisensory domestication of the city's material fabric. Therefore, to understand how practitioners live and communicate the somatic experience of urban materiality, it is possible to consider the skater's eye as a form of "skilled vision" that exceeds visual perception through "plural, embodied, and socially embedded processes of enskillment" (Grasseni 2020: 1–2) in daily, collective, and multisensory contact with the city and its material culture.

Framing the role of the visual in practices and cultural productions in terms of 'skilled vision' allows us to articulate the second critical element evoked by the metaphor of the 'skater's eye'. Overcoming this enables us to see more clearly how the subjectivation of practitioners goes beyond the general "internal logics" (Parlebas 1999) of skateboarding, being instead embedded in bodily movements and techniques developed in relation to specific materialities. Grasseni (2007) explains the development of any system of skilled vision as "the result of concrete processes of attention training, within situated practices and cultural ecologies" (7). Therefore, rather than referring to a "skater's eye" as a universal device for the semiotic decoding of built space (Borden, 2001), we should speak of as many 'skaters' eyes' as there are environments and material cultures in which skaters develop their movements. Each of these sits within its respective ethnic, gender, class, age and positional characteristics within a global context (Hölsgens & Glenney 2025).

Given this necessary degree of 'relativism' inherent in the somatic-sensory modes through which athletes learn to move, observe, perceive and conceive of themselves within their cultural environments, a connection can be drawn with the discussion in the previous section. As mentioned, every sporting universe is the result of an interplay between movements, environments, and specific material cultures. The body that participants develop, and which they use to communicate with one another and the outside world, is the social outcome of this "dynamic synthesis" (Warnier 2001). In the case

of an informal urban sport such as skateboarding, practitioners' multisensory 'skilled vision' is a somatic-cultural processing mechanism that enables them to understand and navigate accidental spaces and material objects. However, the movements that emerge from this synthesis are not limited to the 'superficiality' of the physical body – even if the antinomy between 'superficial bodies' and 'deep selves' were ever acceptable (Miller 2010). Conversely, athletes engage with the spaces and physical objects of their everyday lives through these embodied motor activities. Through repeatedly performing these movements, they develop a sense of self, as well as the techniques and practices that allow them to recognise themselves and interact within their social environment. Therefore, ultimately, the sensorimotor chain through which skilled vision gives rise to bodily techniques within specific material frameworks is a series of “techniques of the self” (Foucault 1984), whereby subjects in reciprocal motion can perceive themselves and correspond with each other within a specific material environment. Although this process of motor “subjectivation” (Warnier 2001) represents the culmination of the sequence, it is nevertheless important to observe how this socio-motor production of individuals cannot be separated from the practices that specific subjects share, incorporating the very same material elements of their sporting daily lives in comparable forms.

Visual encounters with the “Mexican skater”

It was the same Tony who provided me with an example of this subtle convergence between multisensory visual decoding, material incorporation, and the production of related subjects in motion, which took me months to decipher – perhaps precisely because of its excessive clarity. A few days after we met by chance, he arranged to meet me again in the alleyway. On that occasion, and on subsequent ones, I finally had the opportunity to learn more about his bizarre and emphatic proposal. This time, he calmly began to explain the project to me in detail.

Well, as I was saying, it's not a skateboarding video like the classic *gabachos* [U.S. ones]. I want to make a video that shows what skateboarding means to us. Because, in my opinion, skateboarding is a kind of religion for those who do it. Look around [pointing to the informal skateboard workshop overlooking the alley and the youngsters pushing on their boards next to us], we all work for skateboarding here, in one way or another: *aquí se desayuna, se almuerza y se cena patineta* [here we eat skateboarding for breakfast, lunch and dinner]. So we must shoot some scenes that make that clear [...] One scene has to show someone hurtling down one of the slopes here, as we always do, for example in *Calle Segunda*, where you can see the asphalt full of potholes and cracks typical of Tijuana, zigzagging among speeding cars, *calafias* [shared taxis] and *carritos* [street food vendors]. Another one has to capture the sound... that sound when you reach the top of one of our swimming pools [abandoned and used for skateboarding] with your board and you hear that *crààààà*, without even understanding what's happening, and your senses are suspended for a moment, as if it were just you and the board [...] Then another, showing our work [he points to Ramón, the workshop leader, busy sawing a rectangular sheet of pressed wood smuggled out of one of the local factories to extract a usable board], the dust and fumes from the paint we use to cut and paint our boards. Finally, perhaps another one, in which, again on our rough roads, we show a fall, when you hurt yourself, you

remove the small stones left in your flesh, you suck the blood away and the taste remains in your mouth all day long. (Conversations noted in the field diary, Tijuana, 22-28/08/2023).

I acknowledged that it was an ambitious project, given the complexity of the film work, the sensory emotions to be visually conveyed, and the large number of people involved. In this regard, I asked again for clarification about my role, as considering my limited athletic abilities compared to the locals, I would not be able to play any of the parts described.

Well, it's pretty clear... because these scenes are a story. This is the story you tell someone who doesn't know anything about skateboarding. You're the only one from outside, right? In the video, you'll try to explain all these moments in Italian, moments that are *religiosos* to us skaters. Every time you try to explain it with words, it'll be a scene. But the other person won't understand you, partly because they're not a skater, and partly because you're speaking to them in Italian. It's like skateboarding is another language, right? So, after all that, you just give up and leave, maybe to go skateboarding... because only those who practise it can understand our religion. Do you understand?" (Tijuana, 28/08/2023)

I was not at all sure I wanted to participate in the project. The goal was to create a representation of the essence of local skateboarding, and it was clear that my presence would serve as an alterity counterpoint to emphasise this identity through linguistic metaphor. I did not feel I was the right person for the occasion and feared that exposure, given the importance skateboarders attach to visual media for subcultural identification (McDui-Ra 2021b), would compromise my research perspective and relationships with skaters, both in and outside the alley. However, I also thought that refusing Tony's proposal would sour our nascent relationship. Therefore, after a few explanatory meetings and clarifying that I would not be performing any sporting feats, I agreed to take part.

Even before the concrete project, however, I was impressed by the clarity with which Tony intended to convey a collective sensory feeling so pervasive and immaterial that it could be described as *religioso*. The secular sacred elements of skateboarding subcultures have been the subject of detailed analyses (O'Connor 2020), focusing on cases of architectural pilgrimage (O'Connor 2017), ethnic memory (Buchetti and O'Connor 2024), and the articulation between "risk-taking, emotional processing [and] connecting with an urban environment" (Shoemaker and Bernal 2024: 2). Tony's *religioso* probably fitted into the latter category. Indeed, just as we can talk about a "religious movement" within the global surfing community, consisting of "soul surfers who have distinguished themselves from competitive surfers since the late 1970s and early 1980s" (Corte 2022: 22), something similar has happened in skateboarding. Here, street skaters have distanced themselves from those dedicated to competitions and training in skate parks, in order to embrace a specific sporting "lifestyle" (Wheaton 2013) shaped in symbiosis with "informal" architecture (Lebreton et al. 2012). So, in a sense, returning to the previous vignette, the difference between 'devotees' and 'profane' would be between

those who are accustomed to “remove the small stones left in the flesh” and experiencing the thrill of skateboarding amid urban adversity, and those who wear knee pads and protective gear in designated competitive arenas. Nevertheless, despite my questions, Tony offered only tautological explanations of that *religioso*.

However, after hearing the explanation of the film project and its screenwriting tactics, it seemed as though there was more to it than mere general subcultural ‘spirituality’. The emphasis on the *religioso* term and the clever linguistic play between Italian and Spanish seemed too deliberate to be a coincidence. On the contrary, in this case, the elusiveness of the *religioso* served to describe all the listed features of a sensory-motor relationship with the material environment that could not be otherwise verbalized. This ‘esoteric’ relationship – which “the other person won’t understand [...] because they’re not a skater” – evoked two fundamental aspects of the bodily techniques and movements that skaters develop in relation to the local material environment. On the one hand, it explicitly echoes Warnier’s (2005) argument when he states that “the bodily schema mobilises the use of the seven senses, which function in a regime of multisensoriality” (35). On the other hand, the fact that it can only be discussed in religious terms and understood by initiates is one of the distinctive – and methodologically critical – features of studies on embodiment. This is the difficulty of de-naturalising bodily techniques and cultural systems of sensory perception for those who construct their daily practices through them. The very practices that render them socially and mutually intelligible “subjects” (Mauss 2017; Warnier 2005, 83–112; Douny and Mohan 2020). On closer inspection, most of these practices engage directly with various features that characterise the material culture of Tijuana skaters, both in themselves and in a relation with *el otro lado*.

It is no coincidence that Tony immediately specifies that this is not a “classic” video; whereby “classic” explicitly meant “Anglo-American”. The adrenaline-fuelled risk of downhill racing is enriched in terms of courage and technique by a focus on Tijuana’s roads and their rough surfaces, which contrast with those of Californian neighbours. It is also enriched by elements typical of chaotic local traffic, such as *calafias* and street vendors. These were all traits often evoked by locals when they attempted the complex task of verbally translating the motor, bodily and somatic postures typical of the “Mexican skater”, at my request. The same material elements – potholes, cracks in the concrete and rough surfaces – and socio-environmental elements – traffic, stray dogs and crowded streets – were those that, according to local common sense, made Tijuana skaters *más mañosos* [obsessive, resolute], while also *más suaves* [soft, graceful] compared to U.S. skaters with their clean architecture and style. During one of my returns to the field in 2025, I realised how these two apparently contradictory dimensions are synthesised through the skaters’ bodies and movements, extending well beyond mere subcultural belonging. It was then that I met Gabriel, who had just applied for, and received, a tourist visa for the U.S. after thirty years since his last crossing. While celebrating this incredible achievement given the political climate at the time, Gabriel’s first way of conveying his amazement to me was through his bodily puzzledness.

I had never crossed the border before, only when I was a child, but I didn't know how to skateboard yet. And I couldn't believe it... the first few times I went to *el otro lado*, how steady I felt on my board, how smooth and fluid everything was. Here, on the other hand, here in Tijuana, to skateboard you first have to learn to *flotar* [float], to be light, and also determined, but light with your feet on the board because it's full of cracks, holes, different types of asphalt, and as soon as you put too much weight on the board, it get stuck on the ground and you're sure to hurt yourself (Tijuana 29/10/2025).

This suggests that, even before any consideration of representation or belonging, practitioners experienced the differences imposed by the border on their sporting materialities primarily through their bodies, movements and the accompanying disorientation when crossing between the two regimes for the first time. An embodied difference expressed in practice and immediately recognisable among peers. Some of my English-speaking skater scholar colleagues pointed this out to me in October 2025 – during a conference at San Diego State University – when they followed me into the Tijuana alley where we had organised a documentary screening and skate session as part of the event. The following day, Paul (English) commented on the initiative, repeatedly emphasising his amazement at what he described as the 'unique' nature of the movements of the Tijuana skaters. Specifically, Paul remarked on the delicate balance between the control of the body over the board and the board's control over the skaters' bodies, which adapted to the physical conditions of the local terrain. Something very similar to what Gabriel described.

Ultimately, the focus on daily work in the film project was representative, and celebratory, of the social and material conditions that characterise Tijuana skateboarding community. In fact, as trivial as it may seem, the shaping activity Ramón was performing during our conversation is not easily found elsewhere. Access to incomplete skateboards – in the form of seven-layer boards of industrially pressed and glued wood that are not yet cut to shape – is a consequence of Tijuana's economic and geographical position in relation to the global skateboarding industry. Informal workshops such as the one in the alley, where young people meet, work, produce, buy, resell boards and live together, only exist because of U.S. skateboard *maquiladoras*³. Since the late 1990s and the approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), these factories have produced most of the skateboards in circulation in the global market. The work that Ramón was doing at the time – and the knowledge and techniques involved – are the most minute and widespread material consequence of Tijuana's political and economic specificity within the global geography of skateboarding. Ramón is well aware of this, as he showed me one afternoon in the workshop. He had just received a delivery of about

³ The *maquiladora* industry is a special production system based on the Mexican border that has existed since 1965. *Maquiladoras* are production lines that have been relocated by foreign companies (usually U.S.-based) to northern Mexico in order to take advantage of low-cost labour and permissive environmental regulations. These companies import raw materials under favourable customs tariffs, transform them into finished goods, and then re-export them to their countries of origin for distribution worldwide. The sale of finished products to individuals at *maquiladora* production sites is prohibited by law, although they often find their way into local areas thanks to informal commercial networks.

thirty boards from an informal middleman. To ensure he was getting a good deal, he first placed a wad of cash on the table in front of the seller and then began inspecting the items one by one using a combination of multisensory evaluations. He observed them lengthwise with one eye closed to assess their curvature and touched them all over with the back of his hand to detect any imperfections. Others do it with their palm, he told me, but that way you cannot feel the grain of the wood properly. He taps them with his knuckles and listens carefully to the resonance – a dull sound is good, while a vibrant sound is a sign of internal cracks. Finally, he checked the small, barely legible incisions in the centre of each board. Once the deal is done, he reveals that those carvings are alphanumeric codes indicating the length, width and shape of each item. However, each *maquiladora* uses different combinations, and understanding what one is is the first step in assessing the quality of a board. In addition, workers sometimes make mistakes when printing them, and sensory reading – embodied through years of practical and work experience – is used to ensure that the code and the object match. *“If you ask any skater outside Tijuana, I bet no one knows. When they buy a board, they choose the shape just because it's written on the packaging, but you can only tell if it's really that shape if you're from here”* (Tijuana, 14/03/2023).

Bringing together and contextualising the scenes that underpin Tony's project clarifies which elements constitute the image, and above all the subjectivity, of the “Mexican skater” that I had often heard about, and whom Tony himself sought to portray. On the one hand, it evokes a sense of identity and belonging that is semantically constructed around the relationship between practices, 'rough' – yet authentic – urban spaces, and contact with the world's largest mass of technical objects from one's own urban sport. Thus, it revolves around a kind of “subcultural capital” that is used to construct a sense of “authenticity” (Thornton 1995). However it is not built around a hermetic idea of 'subculture', but rather in relation to an 'elsewhere' that actualises the 'hegemonic' image of one's own practice within a network of global exchanges. In this sense, the case of the Tijuana skateboarding prompts us to synthesise the long-standing debate (Bennett 2011) between Cultural Studies – which excessively essentialise the idea of 'subculture', yet remain attentive to power differentials (Hall and Jefferson 1976) – and post-subcultural studies (Thornton 1995) – which instead focus on the fluidity of codes of distinction reworked within global networks of exchange. However, according to Tony and his colleagues, this sense of 'us' is fully expressed only through an unspeakable relationship between bodies, movements, local knowledge, and materiality. This relationship has often gone unnoticed within the aforementioned schools of thought, yet it is particularly evident to an ethnographic gaze attentive to cultural nuances. Thus, the religious dimension discussed earlier helps us to recognise the dual nature of the subjectivation underlying the so-called “Mexican skater” in its relationality. This is not a matter of giving precedence to one perspective over another, but rather of recognising the relationship between semantic and praxeological elements in the complex socio-motor processes of subjectivation (Warnier 2005) among local skaters. Recognising oneself as a member of a community of sporting practices involves an identity-based affiliation with ordinary material elements – slippery streets and smuggled skateboards –

as well as the development of a body and senses in relation to them – calibrating movements in relation to concrete spaces and developing knowledge and techniques by incorporating those very skateboards, beyond universal and equivalent systems of measurement.

It would seem, then, that the “Mexican skater”, as a subject to be described and represented, is the result of a body domesticated within specific material regimes and their subsequent symbolic belongings. Therefore, that *religioso* is an umbrella term that links the movements of subjects, architectural volumes and technical objects, which, together with an identity shaped around risk, spaces and dedication, act as a matrix of subjectivation for local young people by constructing daily motor schemas. While recalling Mauss's (2017) argument that the relationship between body techniques and magical-religious dimensions is always mediated by a certain materiality, the “Mexican skater” that Tony wanted to depict using me as an 'exotic' counterpoint always emerges as a “nebula to be taken as a whole” (Warnier 2005: 26). That is, a subject made of objects, spaces and representations, harmonised and embodied through movements and techniques.

On failure and on the drama of an ethnography of sport

After at least three planning meetings in the alley, it was time to shoot the various scenes with a group of local skaters selected by Tony. I waited a week, aware of the local times, without receiving any reminders. Two weeks passed, and still there was no reaction. I then decided to take the initiative and contact Tony, but I received no reply. Tony had not been to the alley for over two weeks, but I thought this was just a coincidence. However, I realised that something was amiss when, after bumping into him one evening, he barely spoke to me. His usual cheerfulness had turned into an inexplicable coldness, with looks and responses bordering on distrust. Despite my efforts to empathise, I could not understand what had damaged our relationship. The only thing I could think of was my initial hesitation, but it had not bothered Tony in previous encounters and, in any case, it would not have warranted such a categorical rejection. I thought that some rumours about me might have been circulating within the community, but while I had no way of verifying this, I was reassured by the fact that many people who were more highly regarded than Tony had confirmed my respectability, at least in words. After several face-to-face meetings and online exchanges that ended in monosyllables, I decided to express my concern about our changed relationship when I ran into Tony alone. Initially, he blamed the other local skater-actors, whom he described as *huevones* [lazy] and unreliable for such an ambitious project. However, the evasiveness with which he avoided my gaze suggested otherwise. Eventually, he admitted that he had thought about it for a long time and that I was not the right person for the project because: “Yes, you speak Italian, but you're too involved, you've been living with us for a long time”, but at the same time also because “You skateboard, but you're not really like us. And then you're already telling our story, how we live here, when you write and take photos. We know... Do you think you can represent who we are?”. The last question is almost provocative. I reply that I did not think so at all, which is why I was hesitant from the beginning about getting

involved in such an intimate community project. As if offended, Tony changes the topic, mentions unspecified “other commitments” and leaves.

In the weeks that followed, he still seemed to resent me. I cannot rule out the possibility that I missed some details in the logic that led Tony from a desperate search for collaboration to such sharp distancing. However, the fact that everything stemmed from that project, coupled with the two contradictory phrases he used to distance himself from me, made me reflect on a methodological issue that the ethnographic report had highlighted, but not resolved.

Tony emphasised the ambivalence of my position within the local community. On the one hand, I was a stranger, furthermore outside the binary of citizenship with which one usually thinks of the relationship with alterity at the border. Yet perhaps I was not quite a stranger, as I had already spent more than a year living closely with the community in the alley behind me at the time of our meetings. Conversely, it might have seemed that I was well integrated into the group. Together we skateboarded every day, I worked in the workshop and participated in all the community’s daily activities. However, this certainly did not make me “one of them”. I was not in many obvious ways: due to ethnicity, citizenship, class, language, cultural capital, etc. Nevertheless, the alleyway community was quite diverse, with people from different social backgrounds living together. It was accustomed to diversity and hospitality, and to the passage of strangers. The traits that divided us did not seem to be primarily a question of “habitus”, that is, of how class status and power were inscribed in my bodily movements. The gestures, postures, and uses of the body with which my interlocutors reminded me of our differences, both in and out of practice, could not be explained in Bourdieusian terms as the explicit link between “physical attributes of [a] particular sport activity” (or a variant thereof) and a “class habitus” (Besnier and Brownell 2012: 449). In terms of both practice and representation, what united the alleyway group seemed to be a “body culture” (Brownell 1995) and its movements around a series of “sensory-motor-affective conducts” (Bayart and Warnier 2004) that were difficult to enumerate or describe but were all linked to the local materiality.

On various occasions when my inability to perform local bodily movements had been pointed out to me, the boundary was always established at the intersection of physical actions and embodied knowledge linked to specific material elements. One evening, I was put to the test by following a group of skaters downhill from the *La Bandera* skate park to the alley. I kept up with them for most of the way, but when I had to avoid one of the many open manholes in the uneven asphalt, I veered off a few meters. I lost ground and missed the yellow traffic light at the intersection, which the others sped through at full power. Afraid to cross the four-lane road on red, I stopped and definitively lost the group. When I arrived at the alley a few minutes later, I found no one there. Everyone had already left. When I called Germán (skater of the caravan) to explain what had happened, he laughed heartily, saying that I should have known before leaving that here, open manholes are jumped over, not avoided: “*It's natural*”, he told me, “*and it's also less dangerous*”. Even when he could have resorted to risk or courage to explain my difference – “you could have crossed on a red light” – Germán chose to direct my attention

to natural motor patterns relative to the local physical environment instead. Similar references were useful in opposite situations as well. For instance, thanks to Ramón's teachings, I once recognized by touch the mismatch between a board and its code, which temporarily earned me the title of "true Mexican". It was never one or the other – neither inclusion nor absolute estrangement – but rather a constant process of learning and socio-motor testing in accordance with local material conditions, punctuated by many failures and some successes. Tony's perception of my ambivalence highlighted this ongoing process, which he linked to other critical dimensions of our ethnographic relationship in a sporting context strongly structured by materiality.

If the anthropology of sports is a "modern" (Appadurai 1995) and "global" (Besnier and Brownell 2012) discipline, it is largely because the physical activities it investigates now span many different cultural contexts. The coincidence between people, place and practice in 20th-century ethnography seems to be increasingly rare when it comes to sport. In fact, sports disciplines are embedded in a "tension between universalism, as they draw their significance from abilities shared by all [...] human bodies, and particularism, as those abilities are not interpreted and shaped in the same way in all places and at all times" (Besnier et al. 2018: 3). Skateboarding is a clear example of this tension. From an identity perspective – belonging to the same global imagined community of skaters (McDuie-Ra 2021b) – and a technical one – the basic motor skills required to balance on a board on a generic surface – my interlocutors recognized that they had something in common with me. However, when it was necessary to emphasise distance, this was always in relation to skills and knowledge built around local materiality. The project and my relationship with Tony suggested that a classical approach to that sport – consisting of training and reflection on bodily states through which a general motor culture is constructed (Wacquant 2004) – was insufficient and needed to be complemented by experimentation with the "praxeological relationships between sensomotricity and materiality" (Fanoli 2022: 29) that are typical of the context. Put simply, I could not just know "the code of the festival in order to find my place as a subject in it". Tony confronted me with the ambiguity between "my role as an ethnographer taking notes and photographs" and "that of someone who has been adopted and, for better or worse, starts dancing in the circle, clumsily trying to follow the rhythm with their legs and hips" (Warnier 2005: 88). In the previous months, I had made every effort to "start dancing in the circle" of the alley, slowly adapting to the local material regimes. However, this work was certainly not enough to soften my "clumsiness". Indeed, given that "the incorporation of the dynamics of the object [...] appears at its best by defect [...] when the athlete falls badly and everyone expends considerable energy for a mediocre result" (ivi: 18), the more I tried to dance with the local materials, the more the ambivalence showed up in its contradictions. Despite being completely *adoptado* – a term commonly used by my interlocutors when referring to me – and demonstrating dedication to physical activity, the domestication of objects and spaces revealed obvious discrepancies.

These sensory-motor divergences fully represented the "drama" (Pavanello 2007) of my experience in the field. The way I presented myself through my movements on "the stage of the research field" was always a balance between the reality of my personal

involvement – my identity and techniques as a generic sportsman – and the fiction of “the non-spontaneity of participation that stems from methodological extraneousness” (238) to local materiality. These two dimensions became increasingly intertwined as the ethnographic relationship unfolded. Furthermore, unlike Tony's project, the role of the anthropologist is not merely a performance with a director and script; it is a network of “emerging bonds” (Fava 2013) between the researcher and their audience of interlocutors. From this “implication” – understood as a reflexive investment (Davies 1999) at the heart of which “lies neither the anthropologist's self nor the intrapsychic experience of their interlocutor, but rather the act of entering into a relationship within the dialogue” (Fava 2013: 49) – my field took shape, “composed of social relationships, understood as anchored bonds” (ivi: 50). Consequently, my every action and self-representation implied – and was reflected upon – reactions from the other side. This is because, while my field did not follow the orthodox unity of people, place and practice from an etic perspective, according to an emic view – clearly explained by Tony – the meaning of the body culture of local youth could only be represented by the coincidence of the materiality of the local context, a social group and its motor practice. The uniqueness and qualities of their community of practices and their identity as a web of differences and similarities with their U.S. neighbours could only be expressed through the interplay of moving bodies, specific places and materials. In me, in my daily efforts at bodily objectification through that materiality, the locals saw both a genuine interest and, in some cases, a desire to know (or rather to know-how) that was risky for the “professionals” of local self-representation. Tony – a skateboard photographer and videomaker for at least ten years – was one of them. The provocative question “*Do you think you can represent us?*” highlighted both my ambivalent position in relation to my interlocutors and a limitation on my rights to describe what the “Mexican skater” was. While I had been collectively granted permission to describe it using words, visual language – essential among skaters everywhere – had to remain in the hands of local specialists. My ambiguous position therefore raised legitimate concerns about the validity and content of self-representation.

Conclusions. Learning from failure

Although I was relieved by Tony's unexpected refusal, I believe that my relationship with him (which developed over almost two months) reveals something about the heuristic potential, but also the limitations, of an ethnography of sport where material, bodily and sensory “implication” (Fava 2013) on the ground is as essential as it is impossible to achieve in full, thus exacerbating some of the classic tensions of fieldwork.

In the article, I centred my argument around a relationship that developed and failed within the field in order to explore three interconnected reflections. As the physical practice in question always involves the body in motion at every level of participation, I considered how this is often treated in literature, underestimating the subjectivising role of material culture in favour of interaction with space. Consequently, I noted how skateboarders' visual (but not visual-centric) cultures always imply multisensory enskillment processes where the technical objects play a pivotal yet rarely recognised role in the construction of a sensory-motor synthesis between bodies and spaces.

Referring to a visual project I was initially involved in in Tijuana, I presented and discussed these ideas in the context of my own research to demonstrate that the synthesis of bodies, objects, and environments does not occur in an abstract sense, but rather in relation to a specific material culture and spaces that are characteristic of the local context. Through their constant praxeological interaction with such material regimes, Tijuana skaters develop specific bodies and subjectivities that can be attributed to the socio-physical nebula that they themselves call the “Mexican skater”. Ultimately, I analysed why and how the inevitable discrepancy between my technical and identity-based involvement in the sport and local motor schemas led to the failure of my implication in the visual project.

To conclude, however, it is necessary to return to the difference – already mentioned by Tony – between my involvement in the emic representation of a local body culture and my role as an ethnographer interested in cultural difference. Anthropology is born out of the paradox between practical participation in “other” cultures and reflexive detachment (Pavanello 2007). This paradox becomes even more complex when the body – by choice or necessity – represents both the object of cultural knowledge and the means for achieving it, as in the variously termed “experiential” (Turner and Bruner 1986) or “phenomenological” (Csordas 2003) anthropology. When dealing with bodies in motion, I believe that this fragile balance reveals all the contradictions that constitute its knowledge potential. It is in these cases, in fact, that the physical activities at the centre of scientific attention cannot be explored outside of a ‘body-to-body’ interaction between researcher and interlocutor. In Tijuana, this close encounter revealed both the obstacles to involvement in emic self-representation and the related potential for constructing an ethnographic analysis. It is therefore from this same close encounter that Tony's suspicion and the conditions from which I was able to write these pages can be explained at once.

It would be naive – not to say ethnographically unacceptable – to assume that being brought into close contact with research subjects implies an increasing overlap in how they perceive and move through the material world. While attempting to “be-in-the-world” (Csordas 2003) by following the interlocutors’ socio-motor paths can help in understanding aspects of their practices that would otherwise be inaccessible (Sands 2002), it should be remembered that the ethnographer does not perceive, cannot perceive, and sometimes must not force themselves to perceive as their informants perceive (Geertz 1977). For Tony and his group – who were interested in presenting themselves as a community of practice through their relationship with specific spaces and material objects – this lack of overlap was a substantial limitation and even a threat to the validity of their representation. At the same time, the same avoidance of the risk of ‘going bodily native’ with the alley community – a risk initially perceived by me and then prevented by Tony's rejection – enabled me to achieve a sense of restitution in this writing. I doubt that I could have remained both intellectually attentive and indissolubly involved in both fields.

Finally, the cultural gap that plays out through bodies – an obstacle to participation in emic self-representation and a *conditio sine qua non* for its investigation – is circularly explained in the two reflections from the first half of the article. The cultural difference between me and my interlocutors, summarised as different ‘bodies’, is actually the

product of dissimilar syntheses between physical movements and material objects and spaces. At the same time, as Tony provocatively explains, the aforementioned difference between emic self-representation and reflexive description also manifests as a shift in languages. As I have demonstrated, visual narrative forms remain the sole domain of the skateboarding community, consistent with skateboarders' general preference for images. These images are perceived as more intimate and cannot risk being contaminated by protagonists who do not fully reflect the local body culture – that is the subject and condition of authenticity in self-representation. Conversely, in textual narration, which are experienced as more distant, even an outsider can be granted the right to describe following the establishment of mutual trust.

In short, in the case discussed, visual language remains the one in which local bodies can only be narrated by themselves, showing themselves to the outside world in their essence; just as written language has represented the agreed terrain for developing knowledge based on cultural differences between diverse syntheses of bodies, spaces and objects in an ethnography of sport.

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